

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

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INR-07 L-02 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15

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R 221109Z APR 75

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 3243

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY ANKARA

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1468

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, SY, IZ

SUBJ: SYRO-IRAQI RELATIONS

REF: AMMAN FBIS 191539Z APR 75 (NOTAL)

1. IN FIRST MEETING WITH COS SHIHABI SINCE ERUPTION OF TENSION BETWEEN BAGHDAD AND DAMASCUS OVER EUPHRATES WATER UTILIZATION, I ASKED HIM APRIL 21 TO COMMENT ON PRESENT STATE SYRO-IRAQI RELATIONS. I CITED RUMORS AROUND TOWN OF IRAQI DEPLOYMENTS AT JABAL SINJAR AND ALONG MAIN DAMASCUS-BAGHDAD ROAD ON IRAQI SIDE OF THE BORDER. SHIHABI SAID HE HAD NO CONFIRMATION OF IRAQI MOVEMENTS AND ASSERTED THAT ONLY DEPLOYMENT HE HAD MADE IN CONNECTION NEW BAGHDAD-DAMASCUS TENSIONS HAD BEEN DISPATCH OF TROOPS TO TABQA TO STRENGTHEN GUARD AT THE DAM SITE. HE ADDED THAT SHOULD IRAQ TRY A MILITARY MOVE AGAINST SYRIA, WHICH HE, SHIHABI, THOUGHT UNLIKELY, DAMASCUS WOULD DEAL WITHIT HARSHLY.

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2. SHIHABI ASSERTED THAT BY RAISING THE ISSUE OF EUPHRATES WATER IRAQI AUTHORITIES WERE ENGAGED IN A DIVERSIONARY MANEUVER TO DISTRACT PUBLIC OPINION FROM THE RECENTLY CONCLUDED, AND WHAT HE TERMED "HIGHLY UNPOPULAR" IRAQI-IRANIAN TREATY "SURRENDERING ARAB TERRITORY IN SOUTHERN IRAN". SADDAM HUSSEIN'S BLUSTERING OVER THE EUPHRATES WATER ISSUE WAS ONLY TO BOLSTER HIS POPULARITY WITH THE IRAQI PEOPLE. HOWEVER, SARG BELIEVED SADDAM'S REGIME WAS STILL CONSIDERED OPPRESSIVE AND UNPOPULAR IN IRAQ.

3. SHIHABI THEN REFERRED TO THE APRIL 20 SYRIAN FOREIGN MINISTRY STATEMENT (CARRIED IN FULL BY FBIS) AND AFFIRMED THAT SARG HAD MADE NO CUT IN WATER FLOW THROUGH SYRIA INTO IRAQ. HE CLAIMED THE TURKS IN THE FIRST INSTANCE HAD CUT BACK ON THE QUANTITY REACHING SYRIA BUT THAT SYRIAN HAD CONTINUED TO ALLOW ABOUT 75 PERCENT OF THE FLOW ARRIVING AT THE SYRIAN-TURKISH FRONTIER TO PASS THROUGH TO IRAQ. "THE PROBLEM IS THAT THE IRAQIS WANT MORE."

4. SHIHABI FORESAW NO EARLY IMPROVEMENT IN SYRIAN-IRAQI RELATIONS, NOTING SOURLY THAT IRAQ HAD NEVER RESPONDED TO SYRIA'S OVERTURE OF FRIENDSHIP EVIDENCED BY PRESIDENT ASAD'S VISIT TO BAGHDAD AFTER THE OCTOBER WAR.

5. ASKED ABOUT RUMORS OF WIDESPREAD ARRESTS OF IRAQI SYMPATHIZERS IN SYRIA DURING RECENT WEEKS, SHIHABI ASSERTED THAT COUNTRY-WIDE ONLY SOME 40 TO 50 SYRIANS WERE INVOLVED. THESE HE DESCRIBED AS PRINCIPALLY MINOR CIVIL SERVANTS PLUS A HANDFUL OF SYRIAN ARMY RESERVE OFFICER. SHIHABI, AS USUAL, DEPRECATED THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THESE DISSIDENTS CLAIMING THEY HAD SIMPLY CIRCULATED WITHIN THEIR SMALL CIRCLE SUBSERSIVE PAMPHLETS IF IRAQI ORIGIN.

6. COMMENT: SYRIAN ATTACKS ON THE IRAQI-IRANIAN TREATY ARE CAUSED BY A MIXTURE OF MOTIVES, FIRST TO DEFEND ARAB RIGHTS OVER THE ARAB POPULATION IN IRAN'S "ARABISTAN" AND SECOND TO KEEP UP WITH THE IRAQIS IN THE ENDEMIC PROPAGANDA WAREFARE BETWEEN THE TWO HOSTILE WINGS OF

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THE BAATH. THE FIRST MOTIVE IS EITHER SILLY, CYNICAL OR PATRIOTIC DEPENDING ONE ONE'S VANTAGE POINT.

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